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ABSTRACT

The Chairperson of the National Commission on Excellence in Education addresses his remarks to participants of the National Forum on Excellence in Education. Specifically, the speaker lists ways educators express high expectations of students and enumerates contrasting educational practices through which educators express low expectations. Portions of the Commission's final report dealing with standards are reiterated, and the importance of standards for attaining excellence is illustrated. (RH)

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REMARKS BY

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This forum is the last in a series convened by Secretary Bell following the report last April of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. These forums, together with major reports on the quality of schooling in the United States by such groups as the Education Commission of the States, the National Science Board, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Twentieth Century Fund, to name a few, have sparked the most significant educational reform movement in a generation and caused to be called in Indianapolis this week meetings that are without precedent in our nation's history.

In the next to concluding paragraph of A Nation at Risk, members of the National Commission issued a plea for all segments of our population to accord education the attention and concern it so clearly warrants. We observed that:

> Our present plight did not appear overnight, and the responsibility for our current situation is widespread. Reform of our educational system will take time and unswerving commitment. It will require equally widespread, energetic and dedicated action. For example, we call upon the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, Science Service, National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, American Council of Learned Societies, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, and other scholarly, scientific, and

learned societies for their help in this effort. Help should come from students themselves; from parents, teachers, and school boards; from colleges and universities; from local, State, and Federal officials; from teachers and administrators' organizations; from industrial and labor councils; and from other groups with interest in and responsibility for educational reform.

Your presence here today, together with what I know of your committed efforts elsewhere, responds to our plea and should encourage everyone in this room and those who read and hear of this Forum to believe, as the Commission's report says, that "America can do it."

The following truism is attached to the refrigerator door in our kitchen at home: "If you believe you can or if you believe you can't, you are probably right."

I believe we can and so do you or you wouldn't be here. Our expectations are crucial to the fulfilling of our hopes just as our standards are critical to our sense of self-worth, present and prospective. And it is on the subject of standards and expectations that Secretary Bell has asked me to offer some brief thoughts. I am honored to do so.

The Commission defined expectations in terms of "the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills school and college graduates

should possess. They also refer to the time, hard work, behavior, self-discipline, and motivation that are essential for high student achievement."

We express our expectations to students in several different ways:

- by grades, which reflect the degree to which students demonstrate their understanding of what they are studying;
- by graduation requirements that tell students which subjects are most important;
- by examinations which signal to students what we expect of them if they are to earn a diploma or a degree;
- by college admission requirements, which indicate what we expect students to know before they begin their studies; and,
- by the textbooks we adopt.

What have we been expecting of our students?

- too little homework;

- too late and too little emphasis on what the Commission called the New Basics;

- too much emphasis on minimum rather than maximum performance and competency;

- too modest expectations for admission to our four-year colleges and universities;

- too many textbooks that neither challenge nor educate; and,

- too little effective use of the school day.

What does all of this mean? It means, in short, that we have been expecting less of students and they have been giving it to us. Whatever discomfort this assertion may engender in us, the Commission heard from students throughout the country about the frustration it has engendered in them. Students know more keenly and perceptively than do many of us that they have been expected to give less than they have in them to give and are more ready than most of us to give more. We are, in this sense, failing them fundamentally. The cost to them and to our society of having modest as against great expectations is incalculable.

The Commission addressed the matter of standards within the meaning of the term excellence and defined it thusly:

> At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

The Commission then noted:

> We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized

accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other.

The Carnegie Foundation's report summed it up in the concluding page of its report: "There should never be a child--let alone a generation of children--who passes through our schools unawakened and unprepared for what will come. Educating a new generation of Americans to their full potential is still our most compelling obligation."

Even though excellence is by definition difficult to obtain and is rarely reached, the seeking of it by the many works a positive and encouraging influence on them. Why? Because even though we may fall short of our ultimate hopes and aspirations, we will in the process of having striven for a higher standard, accomplished more, grown more, and learned more than if the standard were not there for us to seek or if we had not striven for excellence at all.

Allow me to draw an example from women's gymnastics, an endeavor which clearly illustrates the notions of particularity, comparison, and standards that help define the idea of excellence itself.

First, women's gymnastics requires judges who are as qualified as, or more qualified than, the participants themselves.

Judges undergo extensive training, are tested each year, must meet requirements of rigorous ongoing training and activity. They are certified to judge only at differing levels of competition. Second, the sport of gymnastics has developed specific standards for performance and adopted a point system to reflect them.

In optional routines, for example, the judges evaluate participants according to criteria of difficulty, execution, combinations, and composition. Bonus points are given; also, point deductions are listed for specific occurrences, such as falling from the beam or uneven bars.

These standards have of course changed over time as more has been learned about the sport, its inner subtleties and remaining potential, and as the level of competition has improved. It is, I am told, much more difficult to score a 10 now than when Romania's Nadia Comaneci did it in 1976.

Education has much to learn from endeavors such as women's gymnastics and dance and other fields where explicit judgments as to quality of performance must be made and made with skill, toughness, and knowledge if the performance is to have meaning for the athletes and artists involved and for the endeavor itself.

Many disciplines and professions, however, are hesitant to make such explicit judgments; and I am well aware of how difficult such judgments are to make. We should not be paralyzed, however, merely because it is hard to do or because of past failures. Nevertheless, an unwillingness to make such judgments causes interested observers and the public generally to gain the impression that excellence in the discipline or profession is either easily or never attained because no one is quite certain what excellence means.

Failure to distinguish clearly and forthrightly between performance that is excellent as contrasted with performance that is not diminishes the regard in which a discipline or profession is held. This holds true for student performance as well as for the performance of those who teach them. It is gratifying to note how many of you in this room, together with your colleagues across the country, are ready and willing to address these issues, many of you having done so well before the Commission's report earlier this year.

It is also worth noting that in women's gymnastics it is more not less difficult to score a 10 than it was several years ago. Where conditions congenial to the seeking of excellence and the authentic measuring of performance are absent, it is easier, not more difficult, to earn an A. The grade inflation that has permeated the educational system in recent years should tell us something about our expectations for student

performance in the schools, not to speak of our own diminished sense of self.

"All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare," wrote Benedict de Spinoza; and so they are. As a nation we have too often been possessed of the misguided view that by expecting less of our students we would get more, that by rewarding the least effective teacher indistinguishably from the most effective we would secure superior teaching, and that by accommodating shoddiness in the schools the nation's prosperity, civility, and security would remain undisturbed. The outcomes do not flow from the assumptions, and it is time for us to address the assumptions afresh. And, thus, we meet here in Indianapolis. I am appreciatively aware of how many of you in this room have been willing, sometimes against all odds, to pick up this challenge and provide leadership of a kind that will permit America's schools once more to prosper and flourish.

It is "by our willingness to take up the challenge," as the Commission's report concluded, "and our resolve to see it through that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again."